Let's Talk About...

Cerebral palsy

If the brain does not develop normally during pregnancy, there can be changes in brain tissue. These changes can result in cerebral palsy (CP), a condition that causes problems with movement. These problems may come from weakness, poor muscle coordination, and spasticity (spaz-TISS-it-tee), or muscle stiffness.

What causes cerebral palsy?

The cause of cerebral palsy is not known in about half of the cases. Several factors may be associated with the condition:

- Premature birth
- Low birth weight
- Infections while in the womb
- Strokes while in the womb
- Lack of oxygen
- Abnormal development of the fetus

What are the symptoms of cerebral palsy?

Some children may walk on their toes or have other minor problems. Other children can have much more difficulty. They may not be able to walk, talk, or eat. Cerebral palsy is mainly a movement problem, but it may affect children in other ways. They may have difficulty learning, poor vision and hearing, difficulty swallowing, seizures, bowel and bladder problems, and behavioral difficulties.

How is cerebral palsy diagnosed?

Your doctor will take your child's medical history. She will ask if your child was premature and if you think he is developing normally. The doctor will check his movement patterns and reflexes. She may order an MRI, a machine that can take electronic pictures of the brain. The doctor may also order other lab tests or genetic tests.

How is cerebral palsy managed?

There are many new procedures that can help your child be happy, healthy, and do well as an adult. Each child is different, and your child will have a special treatment plan that will meet his individual needs. It is important that you talk to your child's doctors and therapists if you have concerns about any part of his treatment. This condition is very complicated, and the best treatment is not always clear. You know your child the best and can help his care providers understand the problems he is facing.

What about motor impairment?

There are many techniques to improve your child's motor function. He will probably have physical and occupational therapy. He may require splinting and casting. At home, he will have strengthening and stretching programs, and be encouraged to take part in sports and recreation activities.

If your child can walk, his therapists will help him walk as best he can. If he cannot walk that well, he can use a cane, walkers, braces or some combination. Sometimes children can walk short distances but may benefit from a wheelchair for longer distances. If your child cannot walk, he can be helped with his sitting ability. His therapists will also help him use his hands to communicate better.

Doctors and therapists will try to improve your child's comfort as well as the ease of care for his care providers.

What about spasticity?

Spasticity is muscle stiffness. It can limit your child's

function and lead to deformity. Medications, injections, and surgery can help decrease spasticity.

Are there other medical issues?

Children with cerebral palsy may have to deal with other problems. They can include:

- **Seizures:** See ***Let's Talk About… Seizures.***
- **Gastroesophageal reflux:** See ***Let's Talk About… GERD.***
- **Feeding and nutrition:** Your care team will help your child maintain a healthy diet.
- **Bladder function:** There are many choices in dealing with poor bladder control. Your child's care team can help.
- **Constipation:** See ***Let's Talk About… Constipation.***
- **Sleep:** Your child may have different sleep patterns than you. His care team can help him get the sleep he needs.
- **Osteoporosis:** (os-tee-o-per-O-sis) Your child may have a loss in bone mass. His care team will monitor him closely.
- **Vision and hearing deficits:** See ***Let's Talk About… Hearing.***
- **Dental problems:** See ***Let's Talk About… Dental care.***

What about long-term issues?

Musculoskeletal (mus-ku-low-SKEL-it-tal)

Some children with CP gradually develop a condition that causes the hip to slip from the socket. Your child will be monitored for this, and for scoliosis (sko-lee-O-sis), which is when the spine gradually curves to the side.

Learning difficulties

A child with learning difficulties may benefit from cognitive (COG-nit-ev) rehabilitation or specialized educational programs.

Maturity issues

The transition to adulthood is never smooth. Your child's care team will help him deal with the unique issues that he will face.

Communication

Children with cerebral palsy may understand more than they can communicate. Therapies and technology can help.

Where can I find support?

Your child will have a team of providers from many different areas that are specially trained in helping children with cerebral palsy. His doctors and therapists will help him with social skills, recreation, independence, and the transition from pediatric to adult providers.

Primary Children's Medical Center provides a family-to-family support group. Talk to your social worker if you would like to meet with other CP families.

Outside resources are also available. Locally, United Cerebral Palsy and the Utah Parent's Center can provide support and information. Books and websites can also be helpful.

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